

COMMENTARY



IS THIS REALLY NECESSARY?

An Open Letter to Our Colleagues in the Media

Money and political power: here is the preeminent political issue of our time. Cash influence no longer occurs by blank envelope payoffs. With private funding of insatiable political campaigns, it doesn't have to. And campaign contribution use by incumbents to preclude meaningful challenge has become so successful that electoral democracy is in jeopardy. The statistics are stark. In 1986, 139 incumbents ran for reelection for state and national office California. All 139 were reelected. All.

More important, the average margin was much more than LBJ's vaunted landslide over Goldwater in 1964; in fact, it was well over 2-1. Sure, part of it is gerrymandering and a political scientist will tell you the incumbent has a 10% natural advantage. But what we have is far more than that. Perhaps the fact that incumbents on the average raise more than *thirty times* the campaign funds as their nearest challengers has something to do with it. In 1987, a non-election year, over \$25 million was raised for state legislative races alone, \$24.6 million by incumbents; that's over 98% for you mathematicians. That's also a quarter million dollars for each race—few of them seriously contested—and election year fundraising has not even started yet. The campaign costs of incumbents, notwithstanding their impregnability, will be more than ten times the annual salary for the job.

Who is paying? Special interests. Not just part of it—almost all of it. Over 90% is raised not in the incumbents' districts but in Sacramento, and almost all is in contributions of over \$1,000. Those organized around a profit stake in public policy now control that public policy. This is not to say that every legislator simply calculates the campaign contribution impact of every vote—but at the very least, the contributions buy access, and anyone who has worked in Sacramento knows what that means. The ability to meet privately and make your case is usually determinative

unless the issue is one with which the legislator is well familiar.

And any neutral observer is bound to conclude that in many cases the effect is more than access. Legislators do not want to offend anyone. They are people, gregarious people, who try (usually maddeningly and to a fault) to achieve total consensus—unanimous agreement between interested parties on public issues. Add to this the fact that the critical votes in Sacramento occur in committees where all one has to do is “take a walk” and not vote to kill a measure. A bill requires a majority vote not of a quorum of the committee, but a majority of the total membership of the committee. Since committee meetings occur all over the Capitol and members are commonly required to be in more than one place at any given point in time, it is relatively easy not to be there to provide a vote necessary to pass needed legislation. The confluence of these facts with campaign contributions means that those who are organized in Sacramento can, at the very least, *stop* almost any legislation they oppose. Special interests have more meaningful item veto power over the legislature than ever enjoyed by an elected governor.

The extent of special interest control is difficult to overstate. It is not a question of degree; it has reached a level of qualitative impact. Special interest control has surpassed negative control and approaches total determinability.

The significance of special interest capture of the legislature is momentous beyond easy description. Our political system relies for its integrity on checks and balances. The dictum of Lord Acton—“power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely”—was as much a cliché of truth in the eighteenth century as in our own, and was certainly a basis for the imposition of those checks by our prescient forefathers. But they did more than create separate judicial, executive and legislative branches. They created an underlying check more important even than that critical tripartite structure: they created a “political state” independent from private interests.

They did not want the state to own the means of production (socialism), and just as importantly, they did not want the means of production to own the state.

This “separate public government” is the most precious of all the checks in the American system—a neutral generic state represents the general populace. The framers of the Constitution were experientially aware of the abuses of unbridled government, but were also cognizant that private power could accumulate, and that the marketplace could be dominated by economic tyrants without state sanction. An important role of government is to represent broader interests to assure the prerequisites of a free marketplace and to intervene where needed for the common good. This need for public check of private power is necessarily most needed where *private* parties are most powerful and most organized—for as with government, here Acton's dictum retains its validity without abridgment. The state performs this check by responding to the electorate in the broadest sense, balancing the intensity of interest of those who may be powerful against the interests of the consumer, the taxpayer, future generations, the diffuse general public. The *de minimis* expectation: a government that cannot be bought or overly influenced by any narrow group, that considers matters *on the merits*, and is responsive to the broad electorate.

Much of what the legislature is called upon to do involves opposing the narrow and short-run interests of those organized around a profit stake for the benefit of these broader interests. That is its basic job. And it has been given awesome authority in our constitutional structure to accomplish that task. For the state, through its legislature, is our sovereign authority: our basic repository of public power and including, lest we forget, the authority to impose taxes, rules of liability so some of us may take by force the property of others, and rules of behavior enforced through penal sanction. The state can and does tell us what we can and cannot do with our cars, our land, and our occupations, and indirectly determines the basic conditions of our lives.

We have reached the point where vested interests are well organized. Our world has become increasingly “horizontalized.” Those who are structured for peer group organization have done so with a vengeance. We relate more and more to those in our same occupations and less and less vertically to our patients, clients, and customers. And we



fund powerful organizations to protect our interests. But the balance of advocacy and monied organization in Sacramento and other political locales bear little relationship to the broader interests of the electorate which government is intended to represent. The weak, the future, and broad unorganizable interests are intrinsically absent from private political organization. We conducted a survey some time ago of the lobbyists in Sacramento representing broad environmental or future interests in land use policies versus those with direct economic profit stake in those policies. The number of lobbyists in Sacramento representing the former were 3; the latter were 235.

The imbalance in a Sacramento advocate count is also reflected in the campaign contribution levels from those with a direct stake in state public policies versus more general interests. Nor is the legislature the only branch of state government where this campaign finance disparity can be translated into corruptive influence. Campaign costs and increased special interest involvement has well infected the more expensive executive branch elections. Of great concern, even the judicial branch appears to be sliding into unseemly obligation. In Los Angeles County, it now costs a superior court judge, who must seek reelection every six years, \$80,000 merely to obtain his/her inclusion in a candidate's statement in the official sample ballot sent to voters. This is about as much as the salary for the position, and has been increasing as a fee at a rate of more than 20% per annum. And this is *before* the campaign starts. Where money for judicial elections comes from the attorneys (and indirectly their clients) who appear before them, we have a problem. Where reelection is required and the possibility of influence apart from the merits of cases affects the designedly most independent branch of government, we have a serious problem.

What is the answer? It is not mysterious. It is not subtle. It has no business being controversial. We must have campaign finance spending limits, low enough to make campaigns doable and high enough to allow for a strong campaign message to come through. Then we must have contribution limits on one person or group giving to any one candidate and for total political campaign giving (an aggregate giving limit). Finally, we must have not total but substantial public financing of campaigns.

The public financing of campaigns should not be a source of objection by

a serious supporter of democracy. The financing system should require some private contributions to filter out those who seek public finance without at least some local support. But once that ability to garner minimal support is demonstrated, public funds should be given at a high ratio (e.g., 5-1) to match and encourage small contributions from within the candidate's district. This makes it easy for those who want to run to do so without servility to Sacramento's special interests. To qualify, one should be required to raise \$20,000 to \$30,000; but once a threshold of local support is demonstrated, it would match to stimulate *local* and *small* contributions.

The notion of "representatives" from districts has become a neglected principle in the legislature in lieu of a very different system of legislator identification: the committee memberships and chairmanships which are held, and their respective attraction to special interest financial campaign resources. Such a distortion of representative government is the predictable outcome of escalating campaign costs—which will certainly exceed one-half million dollars in incumbent spending alone for each legislative seat, almost all of which will come from Sacramento special interests and practically none of it from the local districts.

A public finance system is needed for another reason: the courts have rejected campaign spending limitations unless they are linked with a system of public financing which has been agreed to by the candidate. Without public finance, limits are legally impossible. Without limits, the campaigns escalate like a cold war arms race and campaign fundraising becomes the continued preoccupation of all concerned.

Those who oppose reform have played on demagogic simplicity by contending that the public would never agree to spend its hard-earned money for the deceitful and trivial nonsense of a political campaign—including the funding of campaigns by people with whom they violently disagree. What nonsense. We fund highways and buildings for use by people with whom we disagree all the time. The operative question is whether we want those with a proprietary stake in public government to control that government by financing campaigns or whether we want to buy back our own legislature. The cost is trivial—well under one-tenth of 1% of the state budget. I'll pay my one-tenth of 1% to assure that the other 99.9% is spent in my interests, not to mention the laws enacted which bind me. What is it, less

than \$1 per Californian? Let's not be silly about "taxpayer subsidy of campaigns." It is ironic that those who claim to be so concerned about taxpayer interests oppose even the use of voluntary funds designated by taxpayers, while often supporting tax credits for campaign contributions.

The three-part system of public finance and spending and contribution limits is not simply a model for reform. It is the *sine qua non* to the integrity of our body politic. Certainly there are few issues which can ever justify a violent revolution. The taking up of arms involves death and tragedy beyond measure. But this question is one which rises to that pinnacled level. We fought the British because the government imposed upon us was not ours. We disavowed the authority of any state not meaningfully reposing the consent of the governed. It is a sad truth that we now approach such a state; those committed to the reform of our recently-corrupted model laudably and patiently strive for peaceful resolution, fully mindful that we are asking those in power to change the rules which have created their authority. This they will not do. It must be imposed upon them. How to do so without bloodshed is the most important political question facing this nation in the last half of the twentieth century.

The peaceful attempt to impose the popular will recently took the form of a proposition in California—Proposition 68. That measure is a carefully crafted attempt to accomplish each of the three steps listed above. It even fashioned a public finance system funded entirely from *voluntary* taxpayer contributions to the fund—similar to the model now in use for federal Presidential campaigns. The special interests used an increasingly popular "Trojan Horse" defense: they proposed a bogus Proposition 73. Proposition 68 was created by a group of public-spirited businesspeople, designed by experts, and supported by virtually every public interest organization in the state: Common Cause, League of Women Voters, PTA....the list is long, but includes few with monied influence. Proposition 73 was proposed by three legislators and partially financed by the California Medical Association. CMA is one of the four largest special interests attempting corruptive control of our state government. After helping to finance the petition drive for Proposition 73, it then "withdrew" its support and helped to fund a "No on Both" campaign. Devious intentions are not always exercises in subtlety.



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What does Proposition 73 do? Well, it sounds similar to Proposition 68—on purpose—except it is an exercise in the current “big lie” manure which dominates California’s proposition campaigns. Not only does it not have public financing of campaigns—it *prohibits* public financing. Because of this, there is no spending limit—at all. All it does is limit contributions. But it allows each “political [action] committee” to give \$2,500 per fiscal year (e.g., five years of such contributions from each PAC will fund each state senator’s campaign), and then defines “political [action] committees” to include: “two or more persons” joined together who “acting in concert make contributions to candidates.” Five PAC staffers sitting around a table with their two secretaries can combine in various ways to create how many of these little animals? Each one is limited to \$12,500 per Senatorial candidate; the collection of combinations can raise well into six figures. This is not a loophole; it is the Grand Canyon of loopholes—the exception has swallowed the rule. It means the proposition is worse than a meaningless fraud, because it blocks reform by prohibiting any except private (i.e., special interest) financing of campaigns.

Even as to its details the proposition is a cruel hoax—it purports to limit the “honoraria” or outside income of politicians, and then in its actual provisions limits to \$1,000 the payment from a “single source” as compensation for speeches “relating to the governmental process.” That’s it. Well, they’ll *never* get around that.

So Proposition 73 got more votes than Proposition 68. Why? To be sure, the proponents did not see that the special interests designed a campaign not to defeat 68 so much as to suppress it *vis-a-vis* 73 so that the latter, receiving more votes, would negate the contradictory provisions of 68—eviscerating it.

But the real culprit here is more pervasive, and it is the underlying reason we are in the midst of the worst crisis in political corruption in the last 100 years of American government. The overwhelming evidence is that the real culprit is the media.

This judgment is not made to find a convenient whipping boy. It is based on a considered review of the media’s performance and trends which include and transcend its disappointing failures in reporting the struggle between Propositions 68 and 73. The media, both print and air, have failed their own standards, abdicated their historical role, sought

refuge in the comfort of trivia, honored without question increasingly strange priorities, and exhibited little intellectual curiosity or energy.

Granted, the mission of the media is not the replication of our views, but the reflection of reality and the transmission of information of some import on a scale of values a reasonable person can defend. The media is so far away from even the most elementary standards of relevance that this particular struggle for the soul of our political system—the campaign for Proposition 68—well illustrates a larger and darker surrender by the journalists of our state.

One can begin at the most mundane level. It is June 7, election night, and one reviews the election coverage in the two largest markets of southern California: the Los Angeles and San Diego television stations give virtually *no* coverage to the two critical propositions. Even in announcing the returns, they start at Proposition 66, go to 67, and although the initiatives are being announced sequentially, they simply *skip* 68 to display the numbers and to discuss 69, the AIDS initiative, a silly proposal by the LaRouche people easily defeated 2-1—but which had a vague sexual and “crazy” connotation which seems to compel coverage in the television journalism world. Then on to 70, skipping past 73 to get to 74. This went on all night. The two most important propositions present—by *any* value system capable of human understanding—were treated as totally without consequence. And on the very few occasions these propositions were mentioned at all, they were described as the “campaign reform” initiatives as if they were sister and brother and apparently twins. There was utterly no recognition or understanding of what the propositions contain, much less what they mean, what the arguments are for and against them, or why they are thought important (by, after all, virtually every public interest and good government organization in the state).

Instead, we were treated to the now popular off-the-cuff “happy talk” drivel by people who have done little homework outside their respective makeup rooms. It is bad enough to have media journalists try to sell their programs by showing us their families and hobbies and their swell personalities and private nobilities: the least they can do since they are posing as journalists, albeit with little success, is to do some scintilla of preparation. Perhaps their production directors might consider prioritizing their coverage along some scale of values some-

one somewhere might be able to explain.

Let’s consider what is going wrong with our journalists—and it extends to print journalism as well.

Those controlling media programming have a party line and it goes something like this: “we are neutral and objective reporters of public affairs; we do not pass judgment but report the facts and let the viewers make judgments—always striving to present only verifiable reality and getting all sides to a major point of contention.” The media party line continues: “Any challenge to our discretion (even by a non-governmental source) endangers ‘democracy and free speech rights’ and may be a ‘prior restraint’ on the exercise of our cherished right to speak. That is, those who criticize us are threatening our form of government, our society, indeed, all of Western civilization as we know it today.”

We’ll demur to this self-serving picture; it has some merit where interposed against a state attempt at censorship, but is irrelevant to the problem at hand. To wit, granting that government intervention is not appropriate, let’s discuss as fellow citizens how the media determines *which* facts from the panoply of events in our society are selected for coverage. The critical question more often is not what is said but what subject area is chosen for discussion. Media critics like to bark that these decisions are made to “sell newspapers and programs.” Conservative media defenders then respond that this is a legitimate neutral criterion since the public then does decide what subject areas it wants to hear about through the media marketplace, rewarding those who comply with a larger marketshare.

But the problem with the media is much more complex and dangerous than this formulation of criticism and justification. The justification is itself flawed for two reasons: a lack of vigorous competition between media sources, especially on the issue of subject matter reporting; and the critical feedback effect—the fact that media attention to a subject area *creates* viewer knowledge and then interest, particularly if it is pervasively and extensively reported about.

And there is a broader problem here beyond the “they just want to sell their papers/programs” critique. The real problem lies with the horizontalization process mentioned briefly above. We have increasingly become empathetic with our occupational peers. At one time, we were a nation substantially of entrepreneurs; independent farmers and small businesses. We are now much more concentrated



economically into a smaller number of larger organizations—increasingly a nation of employees. A room of 200 corporate presidents standing in one room would now represent the manufacturing assets of two-thirds of American industry. So as employees we have organized along our peer groups and created associations. And not just a few. We relate substantially to those who share our problems horizontally, not with those with whom we deal vertically. Journalism is no exception. Journalists think somewhat about the subjects of their stories, but they *identify* with their peers. They want to win the respect of their fellow journalists. Outside the entertainment industry, is there any enterprise in America which spends more time giving awards out to itself? To congratulating each other?

The prime determinant of what is to be included in media coverage—which facts to select and package as “stories”—rests with the influence of what we shall call the “media subculture.” This subculture has a series of criteria which determines the selection of what shall be presented to the American people and how that critical “first cut” occurs—and it is this subculture which is undermining our democracy. To understand how, one must examine not its self-professed standards, but its operative rules.

1. Dog biting man is not newsworthy; man biting dog is.

This is a journalist's shibboleth, part of the catechism of the profession. One of the first lessons a young reporter is taught is that one criterion for story selection is whether or not the event is unusual. As one factor in an individual's array of criteria, it is understandable. But what happens when 100,000 journalists all operate under this premise? What happens when such a criterion substantially influences those who provide most of the connection we have with the outside world? Oh, we see the traffic conditions, the people at work, and look at billboards. But what happens when the information which defines our reality comes from the media? What happens to one's perception of reality when a basic criterion for selection is that the information *not* be typical or representative of reality? If one has a solid setting for reality, occasional man-bites-dog stories provide some titillation and are quite innocent. But what if it becomes a premise for a large portion of the information we receive?

A plane crash is relatively unusual. It is also dramatic and triggers our macabre fascination with death—when

we know we are going to die and have to ponder it as we fall. It is covered to a fault. It is a story. While this relatively safe means of travel is so covered, how are automobile accidents covered? Not much—unless macabre or unusual as auto accidents. One gets the impression from the media, if one does not know better, that air travel is extremely hazardous and auto travel is relatively safe. The opposite is far closer to the truth. So what happens when the “man bites dog” criteria is applied *en masse*? Truth is sacrificed—and not by happenstance. Much more importantly, truth is *by definition* sacrificed. In the long run, and on a large scale, this criterion *guarantees*—by its terms—a deceptive picture of reality—an unreality.

Psychiatrists have a name for a system of thought which is by its terms split off from reality: it is called “psychosis”. The thrust of this journalistic formula is to create, in its extreme application, a malady which may fairly be described as mass psychosis. “Here is the world, folks...for the next five years, 365 days a year, in every newspaper and magazine you read, on every radio and television station before which you passively absorb for six to ten hours, here is the world—we shall give you what it is *not*, the exceptions, the unusual.” Might this not provide little service to the truth? How can this system of communications be defended as healthy? As ethical?

In the context of Proposition 68, the impact is momentous. Because, you see, the influence of campaign contributions has become such a serious and endemic problem, has so undermined our democratic institutions, and has become so recognized by journalists as prevalent, that it is *not unusual*—it is the dog biting the man. Hence, it is not a story. Oh, if there is some unusual twist there might be a story. But the run-of-the mill campaign contribution followed by a committee vote walk-away to benefit the giver is such an inbred part of the system that it is not reported. There are few or no stories on the subject. Yes, millions of dollars are involved. Yes, the integrity of the political state is at stake. Yes, laws are passed and more often *not* passed which would address every human problem imaginable, but that's not important. Why? Because in the name of “neutrality” the media has adopted a very non-neutral criterion (the promotion of atypical reality—a journalistic anti-reality). Corruption, when it becomes prevalent, is no longer a subject for reportage in and of itself.

It is interesting to ponder what reality

would be portrayed if there were a defensible value system for fact selection (story choice) by our print and television journalists. We remember Watergate. Here, we had a relatively minor offense, a trivial matter in the universe of human importance: a political leader trespasses in the domain of a rival to secrete a bug and then tries to hide the evidence, even paying some of those who did the job for him in the hope they would not implicate him. The Watergate offenses were bad. But they pale very much in comparison to the corruption well extant in Washington and Sacramento, and in many local governments. Certainly the violation of the law by a President and the invasion of privacy and civil liberties issues raised are of import—but no more so than the buying of a vote by the California Bankers Association, or the blockage of comprehensive insurance reform by the insurance trade association, or the passage of a state law allowing local governments to grant private firms monopolies for various services without any price review by anyone and without competitive bidding, and so forth *ad nauseam*. But those stories are not covered. The Watergate story was not only covered; it was covered day after day after day after day. One publication alone included over 200 stories on this single subject. Other media then began to adopt the subject for coverage, repeating each other's stories and vying for new, often minor, variations.

Why did this happen in this case, but not in so many others? To be sure, the press will report corruption, but usually only when a third party makes a public “charge” or there is a formal prosecution underway or imminent (the reportage of the struggle of a third party accommodates the “war” or “conflict” bias of the press described below). But with Watergate, the media—to its credit—itsself found the wrong. It not only found it—it went after it, again and again and again, and in depth, aggressively seeking new slants.

Why? There are two reasons, one legitimate and the other reflective of another unfortunate bias of the press. The latter reason has to do with the “petty irony” bias of the press (also described below). It would be much less likely to see such stories about President Lyndon Johnson—although his abuses were certainly comparable. This is because LBJ was an ornery character, and he was open about it. He swore like a sailor. He loved to threaten and caterwaul. And he had a certain perspective. He was a gutter, no-nonsense politician



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and was straight up about it. You expected LBJ to play dirty, he told you he was going to play dirty, he bragged about playing dirty, he laughed about playing dirty. The press loved this about him, but more importantly could not find a story because such tactics by Johnson were not ironic, were not unusual, were not news. But Nixon! Ah... here we have a suit-wearing lawyer who talks self-righteously about ethics and responsibility, who projects a hard line against all lawbreakers as a conservative, who pretends he is a dignified gentleman. The petty irony strikes—there is a conflict between what is sought to be projected and something that has happened—hence we have a story. Little more need be involved.

The media does not rationally weigh the “petty irony” story against the events of the day. It does not ponder whether the starvation of 250,000 children that week might have some competing import for the attention of the American people. (The child starvation example is mentioned deliberately since 250,000 children do indeed die gratuitously and horribly every week from easily-prevented dehydration and easy-to-inoculate diseases. However, this tragedy is the normal circumstance, not an unusual event. It is not reported unless there is some other “hook”, such as a sudden upsurge in Ethiopia or the irony of a government blocking relief to its own people. Standing alone, it is not considered to be intrinsically a story.)

But there is a legitimate rationale which could justify (at least some) attention to Watergate as a story: it involved a public official invading the privacy and rights of the major competing political party and then lying to cover up the truth. Hey folks—this is okay as the basis of a series of stories; is it really compromising journalistic “integrity” and neutrality to suggest that informing people about this is legitimate? If we accept that, why is it not okay to write a long series of stories about state government corruption, or the misery of dying children—even if the problems are not exceptions to reality, but are so serious and widespread they *are* reality?

What are we saying? How hard would it be to park two reporters in Sacramento and ask them the following: I want one story every three days from each of you outlining campaign contribution *quid pro quo* votes and services, i.e., our current corruption. We'll publish two stories the first week. Two stories the second week. Two stories the third. Believe me, they will get easier as

matters roll along. This is about one-fifth the level of Watergate reporting with about 100 times the human import. Why not? Tell me how the petty irony bias or the other biases described below constitute a more defensible criteria than one which would lead to these stories. Please explain.

I'll tell you one result. The public would know not the antireality but the actual reality of their government in terms of its major defects. They would receive an education in the *prevalent* defect. Political reform and public financing of campaigns would follow from accurate information about this subject. The press and media would be performing an interesting function: informing the people about an important problem. Yes, it would involve a small value judgment that decisionmaking based on special interest money is not a system appropriate for benign acceptance, and that the failure to make public decisions on the merits is itself a newsworthy event, regardless of whether an abuse threatening that integrity is unusual or not—in fact, if the problem is prevalent it is not less newsworthy but, for heaven's sake, *more* newsworthy. Is anybody listening out there?

2. A journalist should ideally be first with a “story”, but must at least report on the basic news subjects reported on by other journalists.

The underlying and unstated premise behind this second rule is critical: if someone else has “broken” the story, then the subject area is *prima facie* correct for a story. The problem then becomes to cover the story but with a different or new “slant”. This requires a new event, with partial repetition of the subject area but some novelty. Hence, once Paper A breaks the “story” that Candidate X has been accused by his former wife in divorce proceedings of refusing to pay child support, the following question is never asked: “Is this significant enough to select out from all of the events of the world today (toxic waste dangers, automobile safety, child starvation, war, demagoguery, corruption, and—heaven forbid—the good works of a small businessman or discoveries of a scientist)?” No, it is assumed to qualify by virtue of its coverage *by a peer*.

A vicious circle has now been completed from this process. As a result of other “subculture rules” described below, the media has now created a self-defined criterion to determine what is important—

although it is a criterion which no normal human being would ever be able to defend outside the confines of a deserved straitjacket. These bases are now “locked in” to such an extent that our media almost always make the *same judgments*. Have you wondered how you can switch from channel 6 to 8 to 10, whether national or local, and see *exactly* the same choice of stories—often down to the exact order of presentation? (Including making us watch those stupid and lengthy weather reports before they get to the sports.) Some of this is because they share the same sources, but it is more than this—and it has nothing to do with a coincidental rational process which is, 365 days a year, so precise and correct that all channels and papers arrive at the same judgment. This similarity may be falsely cited as evidence of journalistic “neutrality” to media defenders. But a review of the extent of commonality and the nature of the choices made makes rather obvious the fact that it is a reflection of a sheep-like adoption of underlying rules of choice we describe below, buttressed by years of another dynamic—repeating each others' story subjects and cross-adopting each others' subject area decisions for reportage.

3. A story is worth initiating if it involves a “petty irony” (as discussed above), if it includes any aspect of the life of a celebrity, if it is sexually suggestive enough to invoke “happy talk” jocularity but not so suggestive as to be crude, or if it involves “conflict” between contending forces to accommodate the “war” terminology of the media.

a. “Celebrityitis”

Aliens from deep space monitoring our communications must be puzzled. They detect sophisticated electronics, medical advances, agricultural improvements, industrial accomplishment, modern transportation, and must wonder how Vanna White, Madonna, Sylvester Stallone, Joan Collins, and the rest of those dominating this media somehow managed to accomplish all of this. Surely earthlings focus their public discussion, news, even entertainment, on the substantive accomplishments of those advancing human welfare. No such luck.

Somehow, the media ignores our educational leaders, our great doctors, our innovative engineers, our business geniuses, those who perform great works of charity—anyone who is not already



well known as an athlete or entertainer—those with a relatively narrow and trivial skill, or those who are simply visible but have no skill at all. Anchormen who believe their melodious reading voices and hirsute skulls qualify them to inflict their world observations on audiences of several hundred thousand persons whenever they please; actresses who believe that a laudable but relatively minor ability to read lines as if the words were their own, and with convincing emotion, are elevated into the fictional characters they portray, kind of a make-believe within a make-believe. Those who leave a lasting mark on our world are ignored. Even within the marginally important world of popular entertainment, how much attention is paid to the person who *wrote* the dialogue and *created* the character? Have you ever seen a “celebrity” sound anything but boring with a bad script? How often have you heard an unknown actor move you with a good script? Which is more important? Which is, really, all-important on the very limited stage of theatre, movie and television fictional entertainment? Do you know who wrote the last five pieces of entertainment you enjoyed?

Much more to the point and beyond the media sycophancy to entertainment, do you even know who invented the transistor, gentle reader? We bet not. Is the recent discoverer of a superconductor at relatively high temperature—which can shortly revolutionize our lives—now a hero? Feted on talk shows? Automatically qualifying for news coverage, even down to personal dalliances? Why not? Because our current coterie of celebrities are more interesting? Or are people we should emulate?

How is the current criteria favoring celebrity coverage “neutral”? Is what we see really merely “responsive to consumer demand”? It is interesting that one of the few attempts which has assumed that the attention span of the American people can exceed ten seconds, which has focused on societal problem areas, discussed one subject for twenty minutes at a time, and whose main characters are usually not previously known by the audience, has consistently achieved the highest market ratings for viewership: “60 Minutes.” But this lesson is not absorbed because the media formulae (the rules discussed here) are easy to follow, and the *modus operandi* of repeating the stultifying but comfortable pattern of one’s peers is difficult to resist. Why put forth the effort to take a chance when the ease of a story about a familiar name is sufficient, standing alone?

b. Sexual Innuendo and Personal Melodrama

No, we’re not going to play back the holier-than-thou hypocrisy of our culture about sex. Condemn it but leer at it, romanticize it, and then commercialize it. And here we have to confess that there is a market demand. Fine. Meet it. Give it to us. It would be nice if it were honest, but with some of the mystery unrevealed. It would be nicer if the media’s treatment of sex somehow *discouraged* fifteen-year-old girls who are getting pregnant by the tens of thousands—and the boys who are getting them pregnant. It would be nice if some of the truth of something this basic about our lives were presented maturely. Instead, we are treated to the following reality: I am going to feature sex as much as I can but I am going to pretend we are really discussing other things so we can all snigger about it like a bunch of insecure adolescents. And because we are pretending it is something we really do not talk about directly, we will abdicate any obligation to present its actual, heaven forbid, consequences—what are another hundred thousand ruined lives? Actual truth would be in “bad taste.” How did the media become so twisted in its values that in the name of “neutrality” it defends suppression of the truth: rejecting even money-producing truthful and lifesaving ads for condoms or birth control.

We’re pretty sick of the Oprah Winfrey daily discussion of sex with eleven-year-olds, or the now omnipresent perorations of “Mr. Obnoxious” himself, Geraldo Rivera. This media figure, who missed his calling as a heavily advertising plaintiff personal injury attorney, covers the entire wide spectrum of human experience: from teenage nymphomaniacs who “can’t get enough” to masturbation. Silly irrelevancy extends as well to “straight” news, where the mainstream news anchorman with perfectly-matched anchorwoman (heaven forbid that any station should do it differently) are increasingly preoccupied with their *de rigueur* “happy talk” repartee. This exchange of spontaneous informality—kind of a mutual exposure of dim wit, apparently designed to flatter the viewer’s self image—now consumes more time than any single topic of social or even entertainment value. Why do these people think that their ritualistic off-the-cuff question to the field reporter after the report is made adds anything? We know it is not a sincere question and that the program has not allocated enough time

for an answer—assuming the reporter actually knows the answer—which is dubious. (It is amusing to see a programmed affectation designed to create an air of conversational informality become so ritualized that one waits predictably for the fake question and the bumbled, evasive reply.)

Barbara Walters is the paradigm example of the totally contentless interviewer. Her pattern, which has become the common approach through local media news, is to isolate a particularly embarrassing life moment and then ask the poignant question—usually to a celebrity—“well, when you saw your son die before your very eyes, and I know you do not want to talk about this and I understand that, well, it must [sympathetically] have been a terrible moment....” This “tell us how you feel, preferably by crying on camera so we can all share maximum angst” attitude accompanies the sexual innuendo bias of the media and the press.

The melodramatic/emotional/sexual orientation of the media very much infects news coverage; local news especially now has routine “features” responding to this siren call. Some of this is inevitable and can be both entertaining and informative. But the media’s preoccupation with copying each other has led to such a proliferation of these kinds of features that they too become ritualized as well. They then lose an impact which may be well warranted but which has been diluted through prevalence. It is the same dilemma faced by some sailors we know whose language consists of vulgarity to such an extent that only three adjectives and two nouns have ever been uttered. What do our friends do when they are *really* upset and want to swear?

Unfortunately, the melodrama bias has well intruded into the reporting of public affairs. The nauseatingly over-covered encounter between Vice President Bush and Dan Rather during a recent interview does not involve who said what, but how it was said, who put the other down most effectively, and how each “came across.” The media focus on these generally unimportant matters coalesces with the media’s gleeful reflection of our own hypocrisy about private matters, emotional issues, and sexual proclivities. There are many examples, but if one wants an extreme example, look at Edmund Muskie. Do you remember him? He was leading in the polls for the Democratic presidential nomination in New Hampshire in 1972. He was a strong front runner. His wife

was attacked by one of our more irresponsible journalists, the late William Loeb, editor of the major Manchester, New Hampshire paper. Mr. Loeb enjoyed using it as a "bully's pulpit," carrying inimitable *ad hominem* attacks on his front pages. In defending his wife in the snows of New Hampshire, Muskie mentioned how special his wife was to him, and a tear fell down his cheek.

Now what happened next was very interesting and underlines some of our points here. Because, you see, the media has a series of corollary (and really quite detailed) rules as to what is right and what is wrong, as to what warrants coverage and what does not. Its rules are nowhere near the "neutrality" assiduously and disingenuously claimed. An example of one of the many detailed rules is that presidential candidates are not allowed ever to shed a tear. (They reaffirmed this curious mass trade judgment in 1988 when Representative Pat Schroeder shed a tear in announcing her decision not to run for president and in thanking those who had such trust in her they were willing to sacrifice so much to help her. Fortunately for her sake, she cried briefly while announcing her withdrawal—more than one media pooh-bah made a big point about her tears being a "major liability" or even "disqualifying" her for the presidency in numerous stories (not commentaries). We do not know where the "tears" rule comes from; we do not believe anybody knows. It is not rational. It is not based on any survey. It is not based on any election result. It was developed by a journalist and then adopted by imitative peers from New York to Peoria.

It is especially ironic that a tear is cause for such condemnation, given the media subculture which focuses on trying to elicit the same. For our part, we would have no problem with a president who occasionally sheds a tear. It would be nice to know that the power of the presidency as commander-in-chief might be modulated by someone who knows extreme sympathy, even the pain of mourning. But the media executed Edmund Muskie. Yes, part of this occurred because he was the front runner, and another corollary of those in media covering election politics is to attack a runaway front runner. This makes the election more competitive and newsworthy. But it occurred mostly because of the "tears" rule. Keep in mind that the "tears" rule did not cover everybody. It did not, for example, apply to Hubert Humphrey, the liberal Senator from Minnesota and 1968 Democratic nom-

inee...why? Because he was so sentimental as a rule he could cry at any moment. Hence, the lack of "petty irony" value (score -4 points) overcame the "tears" rule (+4 points) in his case.

What happened to Muskie has not been much discussed. In fact, very little of what we are discussing here about the media is ever discussed, partly because in conjunction with its power, it is a self-proclaimed sacred cow, self-righteously claiming the fabric of the constitution which it is doing its utmost to abuse. But it proceeded in 1972 to politically eliminate Edmund Muskie for his tear. Think about how it happened. There was no upheaval from the public. Nobody thought the man was unstable—my God, he was a Maine Yankee who was and remains so stolid that he is a prospective cure for insomnia in human form. But there was a story "Muskie Cries, Questions Raised." Then there was another article: "Campaign Advisers Concerned About Muskie's Tears." (His opponents, it turned out.) Then there was another article where Muskie repeats his defense of his wife and "Muskie Admits He Became Overly Emotional." Then another story, then another. Then these were replicated. Then a series of stories began on the "effect of this tear on the election." Would it hurt him? Were the other candidates now coming on? Was it a sign of emotional instability? It was not the content of these articles which hung Muskie—they were quite silly; it was the *choice* to run them again and again and again, with slightly different slants. The message transmitted is that the subject area is important and some higher authority has verified that it is important. It is important so it must be thought about. If this is all we are concerned with about Muskie, then there must be better candidates out there—Christ, it looks as if Muskie himself thinks this tear is important. Well, the implication here is that something horrible has happened. Everyone is saying it.

In social psychology, the "big lie" is defined as an untruth which creates a public perception of truth through sheer repetition. Philosophers have long observed that we confirm basic reality by measuring how many different people with different sensory equipment independently have the same observation. Where the media is peer-connected to such an extent that rules of selection become cross-adopted through a culturally irrational process, we are on dangerous ground indeed. For now we have the power to manufacture reality. In the

case of the body politic, this has occurred. It has occurred through a mechanism much more dangerous than content control—it has occurred through the adoption of "subject matter" control, with accepted rules for what is and what is not appropriate for coverage—and in some cases (e.g., the "tears rule") even extending to content judgment.

The media loves to justify its political candidate/melodrama/sexual orientation/trivia preoccupation by citing the need to know the candidate's "character". This is accompanied by yet another self-righteous recitation of the importance of the office and the need to have persons of integrity filling it. The word "character" is broad enough to legitimize the absurd irrelevancy and slothful reporting which then follows. Presumably, this "character" criteria does not include the bills which will be supported by this candidate, or how he or she will be spending billions of dollars, or interestingly who is paying for the campaign or lucrative honoraria to the candidate. We are supposed to look at projected sincerity, family support, lack of marijuana experience in college, and sexual preferences.

We have had some very special men and women of character in our nation's history—and they have made a difference. They include Thomas Jefferson—who had a long affair (and fathered children) in an adulterous sexual liaison with one of his slaves; Benjamin Franklin, whose "In Praise of Older Women" poem was not a hypothetical speculation; John F. Kennedy; and many, many others. If one were to list the twenty most skilled, ethical and contributive political leaders in the twentieth century, or nineteenth, or eighteenth, and then the least effective, most publicly corrupt—how would the *media's* current definition of "character" play out? We believe far more in the higher list would be eliminated than in the lower group, for each century. The media knows intellectually that they are lying. They know it, because in their own business there is the same duality. They know their own criteria are really irrelevant—except in cases where sexual practices, personal idiosyncrasies, or alcohol or drug history affect official duties or performance. Yet they continue to focus subject matter treatment on these questions with increasing preoccupation, comforted by the security of like choices by their peers.

c. The Horse Race

The major bias of the press as applied to political campaigns is to treat them



as contentless "races"—the subject matter of most stories actually concerns the simplistic and only marginally relevant question of who is ahead, who is behind, and who is gaining. These numerous stories, which bizarrely dominate election reporting, also have their many detailed subrules. For example, a candidate often "wins" or "loses" one of these horse races depending upon how well the candidate did in relation to how well the media predicted he was going to do. In the midst of their preoccupation with competitive status is this curious island of madness where one candidate is determined to have "lost", because he won only 53% of the vote and was expected to achieve 60% at least.

Some stories on this subject are interesting and appropriate as a rational criterion for subject matter selection, but in no acceptable system of reporting should it be the *focus* of the coverage. And it is the focus of American coverage, especially by the print media.

The very non-neutral criteria of the press is that who will win is important, but what that person will do in office with our laws and money is not. We are, we suppose, meant to trust the "character" analysis of the remaining stories. We all know about Gary Hart's adultery and his fall from front runner status, but you know something, he had a well-thought-out and careful program for the reform of military spending and substantially different tactics for the United States Navy. It is a program supported by many experts in the field. We may not agree with it, but is damned important and deserves discussion—how many of you even know about it? According to Hart, it was one of the major reasons he was running. How about a little about these issues as well as the "horse race" stories? Not interesting? It is damned interesting and it can be made more interesting. All you have to do is invest the same emotionalism confined to irrelevancy and transfer it into an arena of some human consequence. Is this too much to ask? How about trying it for a couple of years? Do any of you journalists out there know that in the era of William Jennings Bryan there were bar fights over whether or not gold should remain the standard for the dollar or whether we should move to silver or another standard? We are the same species in terms of evolution today. Our forefathers were interested in subjects of taxation, issues of peace and war, and questions of government priorities and spending—they went into the field to die over such questions. How dare our

media assume that there is no interest in such matters, and that we must remain interminably in a world of *People Magazine* silliness.

d. Conflict

The horse race bias is a manifestation of the perception that Americans like contests—they like to bet, to take sides, to root. This same media perception of us carries over to the campaign and to all political coverage. The best way to get a non-horse race story before the media is to develop some form of "conflict". An "event", a "handle". But it must be more than audiovisual; it must be amenable to the war lingo of journalism. Someone must make a "charge" or "attack". Someone else must "denounce" or "warn" or, better yet, "threaten". Politicians have realized that to gain entree into the media they must try to shoehorn what they do into this formulaized rhetoric. Hence, we must have a "war" on poverty and a "war" on drugs. And candidates must claim to be in the "front lines" and use battle terminology.

We were talking to our friend Harvey Rosenfield the other day about the failure of Proposition 68 to get coverage. My God, we moaned, not only is this the most important question facing the electorate in the last two decades in this state, but in private conversations some of the editors even admit it is important; even some of the television news programmers know it. They generally endorsed the proposition. But they have not really covered the underlying problems, for the reasons we have discussed, and they did not really cover the propositions.

The problem seems to be so steeped in the subculture of media coverage criteria and their feigned "neutrality" that the irrational rules of this culture may be the one issue more important than those issues raised by Proposition 68. For this calcified and intransigent culture precludes democratic response to cure basic societal wrongs. It corrupts the one mechanism—knowledge to the people—which underlies any democratic solution. It is particularly fatal to a problem where current officeholders benefit from democratic collapse.

Harvey asked us what we did to promote Proposition 68. Well, we did everything we could think of: had debates, visited editorial boards, had press conferences, got endorsements; we tried to make it easy for them—we even printed fake money and piled up the \$24.6 million raised by legislative incumbents in 1987 in one stack and the \$400,000

raised by challengers in another to show graphically what was happening. But they did not really cover it much.

"You don't understand," said Harvey, "you must do what we did in opposing the trial lawyers' secret deal with the insurance companies. We went to their offices and dumped a truckload of manure in the yard out front. And then when we gathered signatures for our pro-consumer insurance initiative, some of us took rifles and stood guard for the photographers, implying the enemy might attempt sabotage. We got *great* coverage."

Well it's come to that, eh? This is what we have to do? How many symbolic publicity stunts can we think of, and at what point do we have to escalate them? And to what extent is the substance of the issue going to be addressed, as opposed to the theatrics and propriety of the stunt itself?

We have a problem and it's getting worse, not better. It is not one that government can or should solve, but it is one that will ruin our body politic unless it is solved. The most important area of ethical education today is not of politicians, but of those who make the critical decisions which determine what we know about our political system: the media. Journalistic ethics must encompass more than a desire to "get the facts straight"; it must include a willingness to admit that deciding which facts to select from millions of possibilities involves value judgments. And that recognition means that journalists cannot hide behind their pretensions that such judgments do not take place. The ethical imperative from that point is to begin to discuss why they report what they report—what the criteria really are and what they should be. These decisions are of choice and should be made rationally and consciously, not based upon the cultural patterns of past mores.

Our journalists rightfully expect political leaders to discuss openly their motivations; and it is time to demand the same from them. For a large number who entered journalism out of a desire to educate people in areas of import, their work offers them a chance to leave the world better than they found it. If they think about what they do, and if they have the courage to make their own heartfelt choices about what deserves entry to the limited information marketplace, their hope to contribute to that better world may be realized.